

BLACK BEARS

in MISSOURI



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Black bears have a long and complicated history in Missouri, beginning with their importance to Native Americans, followed by their near extirpation from the state between the 1930s and the 1960s. The current growth in Missouri's population makes black bears an exciting part of our natural history once again.

History

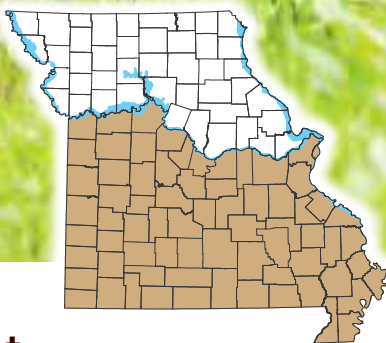
In the past, bear meat provided considerable food for Native Americans and white settlers, and bear fat was valuable for numerous uses. Bear fur was used for bedding, coats, and rugs. Though they were nearly extirpated from Missouri by the 1930s, black bears have been making a comeback in recent decades. Between 1958 and 1968, Arkansas Game and Fish Commission reintroduced bears from Minnesota and Manitoba, Canada, into the Ouachita and Ozark mountains of Arkansas. Some of these bears dispersed northward, and sightings of black bears in Missouri increased beginning in the 1960s. A 2010 large-scale DNA study of Missouri's bear population suggests that our largest population, in south-central Missouri (Webster and Douglas counties), may represent a small remnant of that region's historical population, combined with bears descended from the Arkansas releases.

Biology

The American black bear is a member of the Ursidae (bear) family in the order Carnivora. It is one of the largest and heaviest wild mammals in Missouri, and is the only bear species found in the state. It has a long muzzle with a straight facial profile; rounded, erect ears; rather short, stout legs; and a very short tail practically concealed in the long, heavy fur. Black bears in Missouri



are predominantly glossy black, with a brown muzzle, and usually a white patch on the chest, though they can also be cinnamon, brown, or tan colored. The sexes look similar, though females are usually smaller than males. Black bears measure about 3.5–6 feet in length, with a tail about 4–5 inches long. Females weigh 100–300 pounds, and males are typically slightly larger, weighing 125–500 pounds.



Habitat

Black bears live in heavily wooded areas. Most Missouri bears live south of Interstate 44, but wandering individuals, mostly sub-adult males, have been spotted as far north as the Iowa state line. Counties adjoining the core bear range have more sightings than those north of I-44.

Black bears used to be abundant in Missouri, but became
RARE BY 1850
and then nearly nonexistent.

3 million acres of bear habitat are found in Missouri, most of it publicly owned.

ANNUAL RANGE:

Females: more than **40** square miles

Males: **100** square miles



Most bears don't reproduce until they are

3-7 YEARS OLD.

A black bear's litter usually has

2-3 CUBS.



Food

Black bears are omnivorous, and eat a variety of foods including plant and animal matter. Plant matter includes grass, berries and other fruits, various seeds and nuts, and the inner bark of trees and roots. Animal food includes ants, bees and their honey, crickets and grasshoppers, fish, frogs, small rodents, fawns, bird eggs, and many kinds of carrion. Acorns are also an important food source in the fall as bears prepare for winter.

Hibernation

Missouri black bears do not truly hibernate, but enter a period of dormancy in November and December, with the males staying out a little longer than the females. Their natural food sources are scarce during the winter, so they avoid the food shortage by reducing their metabolic rate and survive without eating, drinking, exercising, or passing waste. Bear dens can be a hole in a rock bluff, a hollow tree, an excavation under an overturned tree, or a brush pile. They might even hide in thick brush. They emerge from hibernation in March or April. When the bears wake up, they're hungry and looking for a mate.

Reproduction

Bears mate in May or June and young are born in late January or February, sometimes while the mother is still asleep in her den. A litter usually has two or three cubs. Cubs stay with their mother for about a year and a half. They stay by her side through the summer and usually den with her through the winter. When they are ready to leave their mother in the following spring, female cubs will usually establish a home range next to or overlapping their mother's territory, and male cubs will set off to find their own territory.



How do bears benefit Missouri?

Black bears play an important role in ecosystems. They help disperse the seeds from berries, fruits, and other plants they eat. Bears consume large numbers of colonial insects and larvae, and in doing so can affect insect populations and help the process of decomposition in forested environments as they tear apart logs and snags to find grubs. Bears feed on smaller animals and help keep their populations in check. They may also kill old, injured, or sick animals. As scavengers, they eat carrion and therefore help clean the woods.

Research in Missouri

Wildlife researchers study the survival, reproduction, and movement of black bears in the state to help land managers make important decisions that affect black bears.

The hair snare is one method researchers use to estimate the number of bears in the state. A hair snare is a simple device designed to steal a few hairs from a bear as it crosses over or under a barbed wire fence to smell bait set out by researchers. The DNA in the hair left on the barbed wire identifies each individual bear, allowing the researchers to estimate the number of bears living in Missouri.



During summer months, researchers trap female bears and outfit them with a satellite tracking collar that provides information about how the bear moves around on the landscape. These data are important because they help researchers study survival and reproduction in adult bears, determine home range size, illustrate how they use different habitats, and help identify important bear habitat. During the winter, researchers use the location data provided by the collar to find the female bear in her den to see if she has any cubs. Keeping track of how many cubs survive each year helps researchers learn how quickly the bear population is growing.

Scientific research, combined with reports and input from the public, helps wildlife biologists manage the bear population as it grows. Knowing the number of bears on the landscape and understanding what kinds of areas they like to live in helps the Conservation Department keep the bear population healthy, and keep people and communities safe.



MDC research suggests that
MISSOURI is **HOME** to approximately
800 BLACK BEARS



BE BEAR AWARE

Black bears are typically very shy and go out of their way to avoid humans. While there have been incidents of black bears behaving aggressively towards humans, and even attacking them, these are very rare. However, it's always best to be alert and aware of your surroundings when you're in bear country. Watch for signs that bears have been in the area recently, and make noise so a bear can hear you coming and leave the area. If you see a bear, leave it alone and don't get closer to it for any reason.

Another important part of being bear aware is to never feed bears. If bears find human food or pet foods, they will remember and return for more. Once they start eating these human-supplied foods, bears can lose their fear of humans and that usually leads to dangerous encounters and the bear being destroyed. A fed bear is a dead bear.



Stay alert to avoid a confrontation with a bear:

- Make noise so you don't surprise a bear — clap, sing, or talk loudly. If a bear hears you coming it can leave the area before you see it.
- If possible, travel in a group. Several people together are more intimidating to a bear, and it's always better to go with a friend when recreating outdoors.
- Pay attention to your surroundings and watch for bear signs such as tracks in the mud, or claw and teeth marks on trees and logs. Stay away from areas bears would like, such as thick bushes loaded with ripe berries.
- Keep your dog on a leash.
- If you see a bear, leave it alone! Do not approach it.

If you encounter a bear up close:

- Remain calm and stay standing.
- Make sure the bear is not cornered and has an escape route.
- Speak to the bear in a calm voice.
- Back away slowly. Don't turn your back on the bear, and never run away.
- Don't climb a tree — bears are excellent climbers so it's not a safe place.
- If the bear stands on its hind legs, it may be trying to get a better view or detect smells in the air. This is not a sign of aggression.
- If the bear huffs, snaps or pops its jaws, or swats at the ground, it's trying to tell you that you're too close. Slowly back away and give it more space.
- Sometimes bears will bluff charge, running at a person but then stopping short or swerving off. Stand still until the bear stops and then slowly back away.
- Consider carrying bear spray, a type of self-defense pepper spray specifically made for use against bears. Carry the spray where you can get to it quickly, such as in a holster on your belt. Spray a cloud of the pepper spray between yourself and a charging bear to incapacitate it. Never spray bear spray on tents or clothing, because it does not work like mosquito repellent, and the peppery smell could even attract bears. Follow the directions provided with the spray, and look for training videos online demonstrating its use.





BEAR AWARE while camping

- Keep your campsite clean and free of food odor. Wash cookware and remove garbage daily.
- Do not leave garbage in camp overnight.
- Pack food, garbage, and all scented items (such as toothpaste, deodorant, sunscreen, soap, etc.) in closed containers and keep them in your car, trailer, or a bear-proof container.
- When backpacking, place food and other smelly items in plastic or burlap bags and use rope to suspend bags over a tree limb at least five feet from the nearest tree trunk and at least 12 feet above the ground. Keep your tent site at least 100 yards from where you hang your bags and cook your food.



Sleeping Area

Food Storage Area

Wind Direction

Cooking Area



BEAR AWARE on your property

Most of the conflicts between humans and wildlife are preventable. Problems with bears around your property can be prevented by not encouraging them to hang around. Keep anything a bear might eat securely locked away so they can't access it. Once a bear learns to find food on your property, it will keep coming back again and again. Bears that behave aggressively are often those that have fed on garbage or other human-supplied food sources and as a result have lost their natural fear of humans.

A fed bear is a dead bear.

- Feeding bears makes them lose their natural fear of humans, and teaches them to see humans as food providers. They will learn to go to places like homes, campsites, and neighborhoods to look for food, instead of staying in the woods.
- A bear that has gotten used to getting food from humans may become aggressive and dangerous. When this happens, the bear has to be destroyed.
- Help bears stay wild and healthy, and keep yourself and your neighbors safe. Don't feed bears.

Never feed a bear, on purpose or accidentally. Keep your property free of food items that could attract a hungry bear.

- Don't leave pet food sitting outside. Feed pets a portion they'll eat at each meal and remove the empty dishes. Store extra pet food inside a building.
- Store garbage, recyclables, and compost inside a secure building or in a bear-proof container until the day of trash pick-up.
- Keep grills and smokers clean and store them inside.
- Don't use birdfeeders from March through November, when bears are active. If you must use birdfeeders, hang them at least 10 feet high and four feet away from any structure. Clean up any spilled seed nightly. If you notice bear sign around your feeders (tracks, scat, bite or claw marks), take them down immediately.
- Use electric fencing to keep bears away from beehives, chicken coops, vegetable gardens, orchards, and other potential food sources.
- Contact your local conservation agent for help with making your property unwelcoming to bears.
- **Never ever feed bears.**





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